

# Workplace Tolerance & Bias Awareness

**B**ias is an often misunderstood word that comes loaded with negative connotations and brings forth thoughts of close-mindedness, ignorance, and bigotry. The mere mention of the word often causes us to shake our heads defensively. No one wants to be thought of in these terms.

But a closer examination of bias reveals a tendency common in all of us.

## What is bias?

In human terms, bias is a subjective preference toward a particular viewpoint or belief that prevents an individual from maintaining objectivity.

Carrying a bias doesn't necessarily make one a racist, sexist, or any other "ist." Humans have bias toward or against all manner of things. Observe the pervasive institutional resistance to change, and you'll be witnessing a very common bias causing humans to favor the familiar over the unfamiliar.

## Bias in the Social Arena

Bias is most frequently expressed in the social arena. It may be influenced by class, culture, race, education, religion, geography, or language, but some causes of bias are far less obvious.

Consider a 2003 study that showed men's earnings, when controlled for education and experience, increased an additional \$789 in pay per year *for each increasing inch in height of the individual*. Is there a cultural bias that leads us to view taller men as more authoritative, competent, and capable? It appears to be the case!

Allowing personal biases to influence workplace decision making and interactions can cause errors in judgment, negatively affect interpersonal relationships, cause others to be treated unfairly, and, in extreme cases, create a culture of intimidation or harassment.

All employees benefit from an open and tolerant workplace in which employees are judged on the quality of their contributions. Below are some suggestions for helping to create such a culture.

## Recognize Your Biases

Some biases are so subtle that they can escape your attention. It pays to occasionally inventory your process regarding how you came to a particular opinion or conclusion. From snap decisions based on how someone is dressed to assumptions based on an individual's accent, ingrained biases have a way of creeping into our everyday thought processes. Awareness of the natural human tendency toward these biases is the first step in limiting them.

## Walk in the Shoes of Others

When recognizing a personal bias, it is often instructive to attempt to view things from the perspective of the individual toward whom your bias is directed and think about how your own background and manner could be similarly viewed in a negatively biased manner. This role reversal may yield a useful personal insight that can help you overcome your bias.

## Observe the Message, Not the Messenger

The most effective way to tune out unwelcome biases that may lead you to false conclusions is to focus on the message rather than the messenger or the manner in which it is delivered.

## Practice Tolerance

Because the workplace employs individuals of such diverse backgrounds, it necessarily follows that some individuals will carry conflicting values. If employees are unable to tolerate these differences, the workplace turns into a never-ending battleground, dragging down the productivity and morale of all involved.

Tolerance does not necessarily imply approval. You don't need to sacrifice deeply held values, or embrace or encourage ideas you disagree with in order to practice tolerance. Rather, tolerance is an acceptance and respect of another's right to come to his or her own conclusions.

In its simplest terms, tolerance is merely practicing good manners. You can practice tolerance by showing awareness of the sensitivities of others and making common-sense efforts to avoid offending them.

